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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#) [ELECTIONS](#) [ISRAELI](#) [PALESTINIAN](#) [AFFAIRS](#)

SUBJECT: OLMERT'S SUCCESSFUL JERICHO MISSION COMES AT A PROPITIOUS TIME FOR KADIMA

Classified By: Political Counselor Norman Olsen for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (SBU) Summary: Alternate Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's successful March 14 Jericho prison operation will likely stabilize Kadima's standing in the polls and may yield additional seats in the March 28 Knesset elections. One pollster gauged that, since, as she assesses, Kadima's support had already stabilized last week, the operation may even help Kadima gain seats. A Channel one television poll conducted the day before the raid, already showed a rise in support for Kadima from 37 seats in surveys conducted last week to 42 seats in a poll conducted March 14. One pollster attributed this rise to the return of a number of undecided voters to Kadima. The major newspapers all carried front-page photos of the prisoners' apprehension with headlines praising the operation. Labor and Likud spokespersons publicly commended the operation, but Likud sources said the party is nervous that Likud may lose potential supporters to Kadima as a result of the Jericho operation. End summary.

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Operation Given Hero's Welcome by Israeli Press  
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2. (SBU) Israeli media praised A/PM Olmert's and Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz's successful apprehension of six Palestinian terrorists allegedly responsible, respectively, for the October 2001 assassination of former right-wing Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi ("Ghandi"), and for arms smuggling. Photos and interviews with Ze'evi's family filled the press, wherein Ze'evi's son expressed appreciation that Olmert made good on Prime Minister Sharon's reported promise that he would apprehend his father's assassins. Leading media commentators noted that Olmert had reacted appropriately to the circumstances resulting from the U.S./UK pullout, and assessed that Olmert had not carried out the operation simply to buttress Kadima in the polls. They concluded, however, that Olmert's action will nonetheless help Kadima's standing in the polls. Referring to Kadima Knesset candidate Shimon Peres's meeting in Amman with PA President Mahmud Abbas and to the Jericho operation, columnist Ben Caspit wrote in Ma'ariv March 15, that, "The Kadima locomotive, between Amman and Jericho, is racing ahead, picking up voters on the way.... Perfect timing and a little bit of luck is all one needs in life, and Olmert yesterday had his share of both..." Caspit tempered his positive prognosis with the warning that terrorist operations could disrupt the benefits Kadima may win from the Jericho snatch. Nahum Barnea, writing for Yedioth Ahronoth, echoed Caspit's analysis, assessing that, "The results are good for Kadima. The voters like operations of this kind, in which the enemy is humiliated and our troops return safely to their bases." Barnea also warned, however, that retaliatory terrorist attacks for the raid could "fly back in Kadima's face like a boomerang."

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Kadima Support Already Stabilized  
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3. (C) One of Israel's leading pollsters, Mina Zemach of the Dahaf Institute, assessed to Poloff March 14 that Kadima's support had already stabilized last week. She said that Dahaf is conducting a poll the evening of March 15, with results to be released March 16 in Yedioth Ahronoth, and that she anticipates that it will show Kadima's support has now increased. A Channel one television poll taken one day before the operation, coincidentally, showed Kadima rising in the polls, with the party receiving 42 seats if elections were held today. That number reflects an increase of five seats from last week's polls and a return to the numbers that Kadima was polling right after its founding, when Ariel Sharon was still in charge. According to Ha'aretz, pollster Avi Dagani attributed this increase to the return of a number of currently undecided voters to Kadima. Apart from Olmert's intemperate claim a week ago that Kadima had already won the election, Kadima party members have been cautious in forecasting any electoral benefits that may accrue to the party as a result of the operation. Senior Kadima strategist Eyal Arad assessed to the media only that the operation "will strengthen the allegiance of anyone who has already decided to vote Kadima, but no more than that."

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Parties Scrambling to Respond, Regroup

14. (SBU) Most political parties have praised the Jericho operations, but some have criticized the operation as part of Kadima's electioneering. According to media reports, Likud, which prides itself on its own willingness to use force and criticizes other parties as too weak, appears the most rattled by prospective political ramifications of the operation. Yedioth Ahronoth's Internet site reported unidentified Likud sources as saying that "this operation has brought upon our defeat" and that Likud party Chairman Binyamin Netanyahu had called an impromptu meeting of his security advisors for consultations. The Yedioth site reports that Likud members view the coming weekend as critical for Likud to improve the party's situation in the polls. Likud MK and Chairman of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Yuval Steinitz commended the operation to the media, but at the same time criticized the GOI's handling of the PA after the Hamas victory in general. Likud MK Gideon Sa'ar, played down reported Likud anxieties, claiming that the meeting Netanyahu had called was planned weeks ago. He said that Likud would focus its efforts on explaining the "dangers" of Olmert's recently announced plan for additional unilateral withdrawals.

15. (C) Oriella Ben-Zvi, an advisor to Labor Chairman Amir Peretz, told Poloff March 15 that former Shin Bet head Ami Ayalon had publicly praised the Jericho operation March 14. When asked, she insinuated that the elections had an influence in the timing of the operation and assessed that the operation would have an impact on the polls -- although she did not elaborate how this would pan out. Dr. Ze'ev Khanin, professor of Political Science at Bar Ilan University and an expert on the Russian-speaking immigrant sector, assessed to Poloff March 15 that the Jericho operation will likely not increase support for Kadima among the Russian-speaking electorate, but he added that it will likely stem any further loss of Russian speakers' support from that party. Left-leaning Meretz MK Zahava Gal-On, while expressing satisfaction with the results of the raid, told the media that the IDF operation "has the slight scent of elections," while Meretz party head Yossi Beilin criticized the GOI for not resolving the Jericho crisis with President Abbas.

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